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SUBJECT Protecting Embassies

SUSAN STAMBERG: The United States has made a major effort to increase protection of its embassies overseas, especially in the Middle East. But NPR's Bill Buzenberg reports that U.S. officials say there are limits to the precautions that can be taken if these buildings are still to be called embassies.

BILL BUZENBERG: Before 1979, anyone could drive up to the door of the American Embassy in Kuwait and most other U.S. Embassies around the world. What happened in Iran, Islamabad and Tripoli made American officials painfully aware that U.S. Embassies were not built to withstand terrorist assaults. Concrete corrective measures were taken throughout the Middle East, and eventually throughout the world: bars on windows, bulletproof glass, heavy iron gates inside and outside. Anti-terrorist - training classes were given to embassy personnel. Today, 15 percent of the State Department's global operating budget goes for security measures.

There's still not enough security. But as the President of the Foreign Service Association said today, only so much isolation can be put into effect. Dennis Hayes said an embassy can't do its job sealed off from behind locked walls.

State Department spokesman Alan Romberg today repeated that message, suggesting terrorists can't always be stopped, even when an embassy, such as the one in Kuwait, knows it may be attacked.

ALAN ROMBERG: The embassy has in the past received several security threats and has tried to take appropriate

security precautions, especially in the wake of the recent bombings in Beirut. Obviously, though, embassies, by their nature, must be accessible to the public and cannot be made into armed fortresses. This limits the type of protective measures that can be taken.

BUZENBERG: As in Beirut, a concrete barricade could have stopped the truck-bomb in Kuwait. So far, officials have been reluctant to build such barriers.

Yona Alexander, senior research member in terrorism studies at the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies, basically agrees that terrorists can't always be stopped. He urges that Americans not be surprised by these attacks, but see them as part of a new development.

YONA ALEXANDER: We have to understand that this is basically war. It's a different kind of a war. We're not used to it. It's not a war of man against man or missile against missile. But certainly terrorism is escalating into what we call the struggle-for-power process, as a form of surrogate warfare, whereby small groups, Islamic or left-wing, and so forth, with direct and indirect state support, are able to conduct what we call political warfare on the national level, on the regional level, and ultimately on the global level; and then, perhaps, even later the balance-of-power equation.

BUZENBERG: Alexander criticizes the U.S. Government, not only for not taking enough conventional anti-terrorist measures, like barricades, but also for not taking more unconventional steps. For example, he says intelligence agencies, freed from restrictions of public attitudes and Congress, can do a lot to halt international terrorism, which he expects to escalate to even greater levels of destruction. But Alexander says the United States is not prepared to pull out all the stops, as Kuwait illustrates.

ALEXANDER: So, you can do some things about it. You cannot prevent terrorism completely, but you can certainly reduce the risk. And unless we're going to do something about it now, I think we are going to remain impotent hostages to the blackmailers in the Middle East, in the United States, in Europe and elsewhere.

BUZENBERG: I asked former CIA Director Stansfield Turner if more intelligence countermeasures are the answer.

STANSFIELD TURNER: We can try to improve our intelligence collection on terrorist groups, but that is not easy, in the first place; and it takes time, in the second place. It has to be what we call a human-intelligence effort. Photographs and

things like that aren't too useful in this sort of a situation. You can do some electronic eavesdropping, perhaps, but it's probably of limited value. Penetrating a terrorist group, getting a human agent inside to tell you what's going to happen is very difficult because they are fanatics and they know each other and they put people to various tests to make sure they are in fact loyal to the so-called cause.

It can be done. It can't be done overnight.

BUZENBERG: Admiral Turner worries that this spate of anti-American terrorism reflects an increasing division between the United States and the Arab Muslim world in general. He says that's because the United States is becoming identified as a protagonist on the side of the Christian government in Lebanon and the Jewish government of Israel.

Turner urges a return to more of a policy of evenhandedness in the area, not a policy that, he says, is deliberately antagonizing the Arab world. For example, when the United States threatened Syria.

TURNER: I don't think that's working. I think it's working in reverse, and we are likely to be more and more subject to this kind of terrorism as long as we are viewed as not being reasonably impartial negotiators, mediators between the Arab world and the Christian and Jewish worlds.

BUZENBERG: White House and State Department officials continue to stress that the United States is still a mediator in the Middle East and not a protagonist.

Again, spokesman Alan Romberg.

ROMBERG: We deplore all of the attacks in the strongest terms. They will not deter us from pursuing a steady policy in the Middle East.